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UCP fares poorly in Army camo test

By Matthew Cox - Staff writer

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The Army’s Universal Camouflage Pattern, now under scrutiny by soldiers and Congress, is “significantly” worse at concealing soldiers than the Marine desert digital and MultiCam camouflage patterns, according to a two-year Army camouflage test obtained by Army Times.

The “Photosimulation Camouflage Detection Test,” conducted by U.S. Army Natick Soldier Research, Development between March 2007 and March 2009, identifies four camouflage patterns that outperform the Army Combat Uniform’s UCP.

The Marine Corps desert digital, MultiCam, Desert Brush and a Syrian military pattern all “improved the soldier’s visual detectability by decreasing the detection distance by a minimum of 16% in the desert and woodland environments as compared to the target wearing UCP,” the report shows.

All four patterns performed 16 to 36 percent better than the UCP across the woodland, desert and urban settings of the test, the report shows.

The Natick test follows another study involving UCP that Natick released in 2006. The “Computerized Visual Camouflage Evaluation,” conducted between November 2005 and July 2006, found that “MultiCam performed significantly better than the UCP in most conditions.”

The most recent Natick report raises questions as to why the Army’s Program Executive Soldier rejected the Marine desert digital, MultiCam and Desert Brush patterns in 2004 and chose the UCP for its Army Combat Uniform, a decision that resulted in $5 billion in uniform and equipment costs.

Army Times obtained the Natick test report from an Aug. 18 Freedom of Information Act request after Army officials refused the newspaper’s requests for the report.

Brig. Gen. Peter Fuller, who took command of PEO Soldier in 2008, said he did not have data to show Army Times to justify the UCP selection in light of its poor performance against the three U.S. patterns in the Natick test. The Syrian pattern was not an option when the UCP was selected.

“Based on what information they had … they went through evolution of different colors to get to what we now know as the Universal Camouflage Pattern,” Fuller told Army Times in an interview Monday.

“There is no study there that is available from 2003 and 2004 when that decision was made that says ‘Here are all the alternatives and we have down selected to this one.’ ”

But Fuller questions whether there is a problem with UCP at all, since PEO Soldier has not received any operational needs statements on camouflage from Iraq or Afghanistan.

“I have not seen an ONS from either theater saying they have a camouflage problem; go get me an alternative,’ ” Fuller said. “This is the challenge that we do have — on one side we are trying to be responsive and on the other side, we are trying to be responsible. If we here a soldiers say ‘we have a problem,’ [then] show me the problem.”

The Natick report surfaces in the midst of mounting criticism of the UCP pattern’s performance on the battlefield.

Responding to pressure from Rep. John Murtha, D-Pa., chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, the Army will outfit two combat battalions in Afghanistan with two different, alternative camouflage uniforms in an effort to find a better pattern for the expanding Afghan war.

Murtha launched the congressional mandate in mid-June, saying that he had heard complaints from “a dozen” Army noncommissioned officers that the ACU's pattern is ineffective in rugged, mountainous countryside. He gave the Army until Sept. 30 to come up with a new pattern.

By early October, Army uniform officials plan to outfit one battalion with new uniforms featuring a camouflage pattern that PEO Soldier is calling “UCP Delta,” which is the current Universal Camouflage Pattern enhanced with a new color, “coyote brown,” blended into it. At the same time, the Army will supply another battalion with uniforms in MultiCam, a camouflage pattern already worn in combat by Army special operations forces.

The extensive test sought to evaluate the detection performance of 18 “standard, foreign and experimental” camouflage patterns during daylight conditions using NATO’s Research and Technology Organization’s established guidelines for photosimulation data collection and analysis.

While the report concludes that “environment-specific patterns provide the best camouflage,” it also finds the following:

“If Army leadership desires, for any number of reasons, to maintain a single, multi-environment camouflage pattern for combat missions, then one must first consider all possible environments that a soldier can encounter during a mission set. For instance, in present day theaters, soldiers can maneuver from desert mountainous terrain to oasis to urban terrain during a single mission.

“MultiCam provides a readily available alternative with good overall performance across all three environments. … It provides a significant reduction in target detectability in all three environments as compared to the UCP. MultiCam performed better in the woodland environment than the Desert MARPAT and Desert Brush patterns, while those two patterns performed better in the desert environment than MultiCam.”

The report states that the government-developed Desert Brush pattern would require “approximately six months lead time” to prepare it for full-scale production.

The report also states that choosing a new camouflage pattern and coordinating equipment would likely cost billions of dollars.

One alternative would “keeping the UCP as a garrison uniform, while supplementing combat missions with either an improved multi-environment pattern, such as MultiCam, or environment-specific patterns,” the report states.

Also, for equipment such as body armor, the report recommends “adopting a solid color that works well with all combat uniform patterns. This is the strategy the USMC has used with their Desert and Woodland MARPAT uniforms and solid coyote-colored” body armor and load-bearing equipment, the report states.

Despite the test’s findings, Army uniform officials plan to launch a six-month scientific study to evaluate more than 50 camouflage pattern and equipment combinations.

Army Material Command and the Naval Research Laboratory validated the science used in the Natick test, Fuller said, but the Army still needs more science to back up any future decisions on camouflage.

“Is the data in that report good? Yeah, but it has limitations,” Fuller said, pointing to the fact that the test only evaluated soldiers in uniforms without their combat equipment. Also, Fuller criticized the test for using tan-colored buildings for an urban setting.

“Maybe [an urban] site we use to evaluate urban colors should not be in tan,” he said. “These are big dollar investments. … What we want to be able to do is say, ‘If we are going to make an informed decision, let’s make sure we have some basis of science here,’ and we are not saying ‘we like this color over that color because you are going to end up with lots of opinions.’ ”